

## Gender Differences in Vocabulary Instruction Using Keyword Method (Linguistic Mnemonics)

### DIFFERENCES PARMIS LES SEXES DANS L'UTILISATION DES METHODES DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DU VOCABULAIRE

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#### Abstract

This study investigated the differences between the improvement of Iranian EFL male and female learners in terms of learning vocabulary through keyword method (Linguistic Mnemonics). Totally, 38 male and 39 female university students taking Freshman English courses in one of Iran universities participated in this study. These intermediate-level EFL male and female learners (in four groups, two experimental and two control groups), were selected using Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004). The length of the instructional program was 3 sessions for all experimental and control groups. A quantitative analysis of vocabulary pretest, vocabulary immediate posttest and vocabulary delayed posttest was conducted. The statistic results showed that first, females achieved higher percentage scores than males in vocabulary immediate posttest. Second, in the delayed posttest, females achieved significantly higher scores of retention than males. Third, a within-group comparison showed that females achieved significantly higher scores of both vocabulary immediate posttest and retention. Analysis of the attitudinal questionnaire carried out in this study, demonstrated that the majority of the participants had particularly positive attitudes towards the application of the keyword as a vocabulary learning method and especially it was discovered that most of the L2 learners could take charge of their own learning and performed as autonomous vocabulary learners. Also, students' motivation to use the method was aroused and most of them volunteered to find suitable association for vocabulary items. Finally, instructional recommendations were presented to enhance L2 vocabulary instruction through the keyword method.

**Key words:** Mnemonic; Linguistic Mnemonics (Keyword Method); Strategy; vocabulary learning; Autonomy

#### Résumé

Cette étude examine les différences entre l'amélioration des apprenants EFL iranienne hommes et femmes en termes d'apprentissage du vocabulaire à travers la méthode clé (mnémoniques linguistique). Totalemment, 38 hommes et 39 étudiantes universitaires qui suivent des cours en anglais Freshman dans une des universités en Iran ont participé à cette étude. Ces apprenants de niveau intermédiaire EFL mâles et femelles (en quatre groupes, deux expérimentaux et deux groupes de contrôle), ont été sélectionnés à l'aide de test de placement Oxford (Allan, 2004). La longueur du programme d'enseignement a été de 3 séances pour tous les groupes expérimentaux et de contrôle. Une analyse quantitative de prétest de vocabulaire, le vocabulaire post-test immédiat et post-test retardé le vocabulaire a été menée. Les résultats statistiques montrent que, premièrement, les femmes ont obtenu un score de pourcentage de plus que les hommes dans le vocabulaire post-test immédiat. Deuxièmement, dans le post-test différé, les femmes ont obtenu un score significativement plus élevé de rétention que les mâles. Troisièmement, une comparaison intra-groupe ont montré que les femelles ont obtenu un score significativement plus élevé de post-test du vocabulaire à la fois immédiate et de rétention. L'analyse du questionnaire d'attitudes réalisées dans cette étude, a démontré que la majorité des participants avaient une attitude particulièrement positive vers l'application du mot-clé comme une méthode d'apprentissage du vocabulaire et surtout on a découvert que la plupart des apprenants de L2 pourrait prendre en charge leur propre d'apprentissage et se produit comme les apprenants autonomes du vocabulaire. En outre, la motivation des élèves à utiliser la méthode a été suscité et la plupart sont portés volontaires pour trouver l'association

approprié pour des éléments de vocabulaire. Enfin, les recommandations pédagogiques ont été présentées pour améliorer l'enseignement du vocabulaire L2 par la méthode des mots clés.

**Mots clés:** Mnémonique; Mnémoniques linguistique (méthode des mots-clés); Stratégie; l'Apprentissage du vocabulaire; l'Autonomie

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## INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is fundamental to language and is of great significance to L2 learners. Words are the main part of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot express the intended meaning. However, the study of vocabulary was one of the unsupported areas in the researches for English language learners while the research about grammatical and phonological structure had been high-ranking based on behaviorist psychology. It valued audio-lingual method as a good quality process to learn foreign languages by paying systematic attention to intensive exercises of basic sentence patterns and their pronunciation (DeCarrico, 2001). Direct method or audio-lingual method in this time emphasized oral skills, correct production, and imperfect vocabulary knowledge as a way to build excellent language use habits. From this outlook, good language habits would sooner or later show the way to an increased vocabulary. Then, Revolutionary conversions in linguistic theory were brought by Chomsky. In his work, language teaching was perceived as a rationalist's structure rather than the behaviorists' concept of habit formation. The vital hypothesis was that language is represented as a speaker's mental grammar, in another word, a set of abstract rules for making grammatical sentences. Since, language learning was considered as rule achievement, not habit formation, vocabulary was rather important; though, rule learning still has a place in language learning (Decarrico, 2001). In 1970's, Hymes's notion of communicative competence pointed out the sociolinguistic and pragmatic feature governing effective use of language (Hymes, 1972). He was mainly concerned about using language for meaningful communication, plus the proper use of language in actual social contexts. However, during the 1970s existing linguistics and cognitive psychology encouraged the psycholinguistic approach, which focused on guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words through the use of contextual clues (Coady, 1993). The key role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language

learning has been recently recognized by investigator in the field. Accordingly, several types of approaches, methods and exercises have been presented to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995).

It has been recommended that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching certain words but also providing learners with strategies necessary to develop their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstjin, 1993, cited in Morin & Goebel, 2001). According to Schmitt (1997) final taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, one of these strategies is Linguistic Mnemonics or keyword method that consider as a kind of memory strategy. Language learning strategies promote greater overall self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are autonomous learners who are able to assuming responsibility for their own learning and gradually achieving confidence, commitment and proficiency (Oxford, 1990). One of the methods for maintaining self-directed vocabulary learning is Mnemonics. Mnemonics work by growing retrieval plan during encoding so that a word can be brought to mind through verbal and visual clues. Learners need to trial different kinds of mnemonic methods to see which ones work best for them. Thompson (2002) arranged this technique into two categories: a. the keyword method (linguistic mnemonics) b. Pictures and visualization (Visual Mnemonics). To memorize a new piece of information, a suitable replacement word (the keyword) is selected and then connected to the meaning of the initial word by a mental image. (Mental images are not limited to the keyword method; most visually-oriented mnemonic systems use them.) By reminding the keyword, the original word and its meaning can be remembered.

## Gender and Second Language Vocabulary Learning

Psychologists have discovered that there are significant distinction in cognitive performance of males and females. Having an inquiry on gender and instructional programs in the language classroom, Batters (1986) concluded several elements significantly differing female learners from male ones. For example, Batters (1986) found that first, females expend more time on "attentive activities" than males. Attentive activities are consisted of "listening to the teacher, to the tape, to other classmates, observing and reading". Secondly, males were better in "oral and participatory activities", such as "speaking to the teacher and to other learners in the foreign language, taking part in group work or demonstration and showing spontaneity (Batters, 1986, p. 78)". Additionally, some studies found both genders performed significantly different language learning outcomes (Cattell, 2000; McGlone, 1980; Springer & Deutsch, 1989; Kimura, 1993). The results of L2 studies reveal that gender has been shown to be a noteworthy variable in utilizing strategies to learn a second language (Oxford, 2002). For example, women used vocabulary strategies more regularly than men

according to Oxford's (1990), 50 strategies on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, including memory, cognitive, metacognitive, determination, and social strategies (Lan & Oxford, 2003). Goh and Foong (1997) observed that there were major differences between males and females in the categories of compensation and affective strategies. However, few studies compared male and female learners' vocabulary improvement using keyword method. Moreover, there are a small number of studies carried out on the attitudes and opinions of English language learners in the field. Although majority of English language learners and English language teachers are in EFL contexts, most of the earlier studies on students attitudes and preferences towards vocabulary learning strategies at tertiary level are initiated in ESL contexts. However, there are also a number of studies in the EFL contexts like Turkey, Taiwan (Chen, H. J, 1998; Sarani, A. & Kafipour, R, 2008). Therefore, the current study was administered to examine whether there were significant differences between male and female EFL learners according to the application of the keyword method in Iranian context and analyzing their opinions towards using this method.

## 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Mnemonics (keyword method) can be considered as a very beneficial method for acquiring a large domain of vocabulary autonomously. However, the Keyword Method has remained largely unpopular with both teachers and learners. Also, no teacher would like to set a syllabus that would excessively disadvantage one particular gender group of students. Therefore, it is important to determine whether or not keyword method is truly helpful for a gender's group underlying ability. At present, the study was set out to determine whether there were gender differences in vocabulary immediate acquisition, and vocabulary retention of students through the use of keyword method. In addition, this study examined how students perceive the incorporation and use of Keyword method in vocabulary language learning in vocabulary instruction in an EFL context. Results of the present study will hopefully provide potentially useful data for better understanding gender differences in a vocabulary learning context. The results of this particular study are believed to propose important implications for ELT in Iran as well as in different EFL and ESL settings in terms of development of language teaching materials and classroom practices.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An attempt has been made in this study to find appropriate answers to the following questions:

1<sup>st</sup>. Does the application of keyword method lead to the improvement of Iranian male intermediate EFL

learners' vocabulary learning?

2<sup>nd</sup>. Does the application of keyword method lead to the improvement of Iranian female intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

3<sup>rd</sup>. Is there any significant difference between improvement of Iranian male and female intermediate EFL learners in terms of learning vocabulary through keyword method?

4<sup>st</sup>. Do the L2 learners have positive attitudes towards the application of the keyword method as a vocabulary learning technique?

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1 Participants

The sampling of this research was done at Islamic Azad University Najaf Abad Branch. A total of 77 students (38 males, 39 females) were selected from 95 intermediate English learners (18-24 years of age with roughly 7 years of experience in learning English) based on the scores of "Oxford Placement Test" (OPT). Finally, there were four groups of participants in the study, the first group was made up of 19 male students and assigned as the male experimental group. The second group composed of 19 male students and assigned as the male control group and the third group was made up of the 20 female students and assigned as the female experimental group and finally the fourth group composed of 19 female students and assigned as female control group.

### 3.2 Instruments

a. Oxford Placement Test (OPT): 100-item Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004) b. Vocabulary Pretest c. Vocabulary Immediate Recall Posttest d. Vocabulary Delayed Recall Posttest: (the same as the immediate posttest). The tests reliability was calculated using Kr-21 formula, which was applied on a pilot group of 25 students who were randomly chosen from the original population of the study. The reliability of the pretest was 0.73 and for immediate posttest it was 0.75. The tests content was validated by a team of experienced English language teachers. e. Questionnaire: A 20-item questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the treatment. The questionnaire was designed in the form of a 5- point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative. A pilot experimentation of the questionnaire was performed on EFL learners whose characteristics were similar to those of the main participants of the study. Reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using the internal consistency estimate of reliability. The calculated Cronbach's Alpha was (0.83). Therefore, it demonstrated a reasonable level of reliability. The validity of the questionnaire was approved by a panel of experts in English department of Najaf Abad Islamic Azad



University.

### 3.3 Procedure

An Oxford Placement Test was administered in order to select the participants. Seventy seven subjects whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and assigned as the main participants of the present study. Then a vocabulary pretest was designed and administered to the participants one week prior to the study and it was based on the words that students did not know. It was a 40 multiple choice vocabulary test. The result of this test was compared with those of the immediate recall posttest. About 20 minutes of each session at experimental class was allocated to working on keyword method. Each group (both male and female group) had the same teacher and was taught the same set of words but the experimental groups, each session received a sheet having three columns. The first column consisted of 10 English words, the second column contained their equivalence in Persian and the third column was left blank to be filled by the students. The students were required to find a kind of association or link through the similarity of the form of those two columns. Then they were asked to write a meaningful sentence concluding this link in third column. But the control group received the same sets of words in a sheet with only two columns. The first column consisted of 10 English words and the second column was the translation of those words in Persian. These students were supposed to memorize these words by any strategy they preferred. Then, after the last session was over, an immediate recall post test was administered. The aim of the test was measuring the short period effects of keyword method. The duration of the course was 3 sessions for all experimental and control groups. Two weeks later, the delayed recall post-test of the entire words was administered in order to measure long-term effects of this method and for comparing the results with those of the immediate post test. Afterwards, the questionnaire was given to the students in the classroom at the end of the course. This questionnaire helped the researcher to determine the student's attitudes with regard to take advantage of the keyword method.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

77 subjects whose scores on Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004) were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and assigned as the main participants of the present study. In order to begin the study and make sure that the four groups were homogeneous in terms of vocabulary knowledge, the researcher administered the vocabulary pre-test to four groups.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of the Mean Scores of the Learners' OPT scores**

|       | N  | Mean    | Minimum | Maximum |
|-------|----|---------|---------|---------|
| 1     | 20 | 30.2000 | 23.00   | 37.00   |
| 2     | 19 | 30.1579 | 22.00   | 37.00   |
| 3     | 19 | 29.6842 | 22.00   | 37.00   |
| 4     | 19 | 28.1000 | 22.00   | 37.00   |
| Total | 77 | 29.5256 | 22.00   | 37.00   |

Also a one-way ANOVA was performed on the scores with a significance level set at .05. The results showed no significance differences among the groups. In simple words, the four groups were homogenous in terms of lexical knowledge of the new target words at the beginning of the course (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**One-Way ANOVA on Learners' Pre-test Scores**  
**Dependent Variable: Scores**

| Source          | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F       | Sig  |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|---------|------|
| Corrected Model | 9.330 <sup>a</sup>      | 3  | 3.110       | .094    | .963 |
| Intercept       | 16642.635               | 1  | 16642.635   | 500.623 | .000 |
| gender          | 6.686                   | 1  | 6.686       | .201    | .655 |
| group           | 1.441                   | 1  | 1.441       | .043    | .836 |
| gender * group  | 1.228                   | 1  | 1.228       | .037    | .848 |
| Error           | 2426.800                | 73 | 33.244      |         |      |
| Total           | 19078.000               | 77 |             |         |      |
| Corrected Total | 2436.130                | 76 |             |         |      |

a. R Squared = .004 (Adjusted R Squared = -.037)

For testing the first and second hypothesis, Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of immediate posttest related to the males and females in both experimental and control groups. This suggests that the experimental group, which received vocabulary instruction through the keyword method, significantly outperformed the control group, which did not receive vocabulary instruction through this method. This indicates the superiority of the keyword method to simply memorizing word lists. This table also, compares the mean scores of immediate posttest in control and experimental groups in relation to gender. In regard to testing the third research hypothesis (There is not any significant difference between improvement of Iranian male and female intermediate EFL learners in terms of learning vocabulary through keyword method), Table 3 shows that there are significant differences between the male and female groups in terms of the mean of immediate posttest scores. According to this table, the mean of immediate posttest scores for male experimental group is 18.7895 and for female experimental group is 22.8000. The female students performed better than their male counterparts as the mean score shows. This result, suggests that there are gender differences in the amount of effectiveness of the keyword method.

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics on Immediate Posttest of Male and Female in Experimental and Control Groups**  
**Dependent Variable: Scores**

| Gender | Group        | Mean    | Std. Deviation | N  |
|--------|--------------|---------|----------------|----|
| Male   | Experimental | 18.7895 | 7.64184        | 19 |
|        | control      | 17.3158 | 6.60011        | 19 |
|        | Total        | 18.0526 | 7.08232        | 38 |
| Female | Experimental | 22.8000 | 5.58758        | 20 |
|        | control      | 15.6316 | 5.51977        | 19 |
|        | Total        | 19.3077 | 6.57409        | 39 |
| Total  | Experimental | 20.8462 | 6.88453        | 39 |
|        | control      | 16.4737 | 6.06156        | 38 |
|        | Total        | 18.6883 | 6.81380        | 77 |

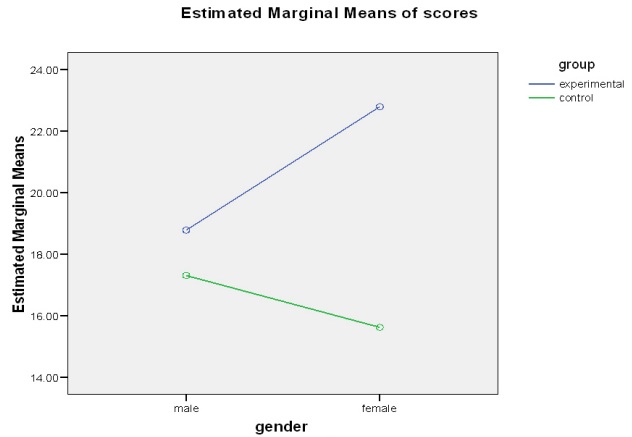
From Table 3, it is clear that an increase is observed in both male and female experimental groups, but the increase is higher for female experimental group. Also the results of the repeated measures ANOVA are represented in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**One-Way ANOVA on Male and Female Learners' Immediate Post-test Scores**  
**Dependent Variable: Scores**

| Source          | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F       | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|---------|------|---------------------|
| Corrected Total |                         |    |             |         |      |                     |
| Mode            | 551.635 <sup>a</sup>    | 3  | 183.878     | 4.509   | .006 | .156                |
| Intercept       | 26723.817               | 1  | 26723.817   | 655.329 | .000 | .900                |
| gender          | 26.031                  | 1  | 26.031      | .638    | .427 | .009                |
| group           | 359.249                 | 1  | 359.249     | 8.810   | .004 | .108                |
| gender * group  | 155.993                 | 1  | 155.993     | 3.825   | .054 | .050                |
| Error           | 2976.884                | 73 | 40.779      |         |      |                     |
| Total           | 30421.000               | 77 |             |         |      |                     |
| Corrected Total | 3528.519                | 76 |             |         |      |                     |

a. R Squared = .156 (Adjusted R Squared = .122)

This table shows that the effect of group reached a significant level ( $F=8.810, p=0.004$ .) and the main effect of gender also reached no significant level ( $F=0.638, p=0.427$ ), with the females ( $M=22.8000$  in Table 4.9) outperformed the males ( $M=18.7895$  in Table 3) in the immediate posttest. So it means that, in general, both experimental groups are better than control groups but between two experimental groups, females outperformed males. The interaction effect between gender and group was significant ( $F=3.825, p=0.054$ ). It means that gender has an influence on the effectiveness of the keyword method. The table shows that there are statistically significant differences at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) between the adjusted means of the students' scores on the immediate post-test attributed to the interaction between the teaching procedure and students' gender. Figure 1 presents this interaction.



**Figure 1**  
**The Interaction between the Variables of the Study (gender, group)**

Figure 1 shows that there is a significant difference between females and males in the experimental group in favor of the females. Figure 1, also shows an observed difference between the males and the females in the control group in favor of the males. So, the figure shows that there is a significant difference between the achievement of males and females in the experimental group and according to the result of immediate posttest, females outperformed males. Also table 4 displays that there are significant differences between the male and female groups in terms of the mean scores of delayed recall posttest. According to this table, the mean of delayed posttest scores for male experimental group is 17.00 and for female experimental group is 21.75.

**Table 5**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Males and Females Delayed Posttest Scores**

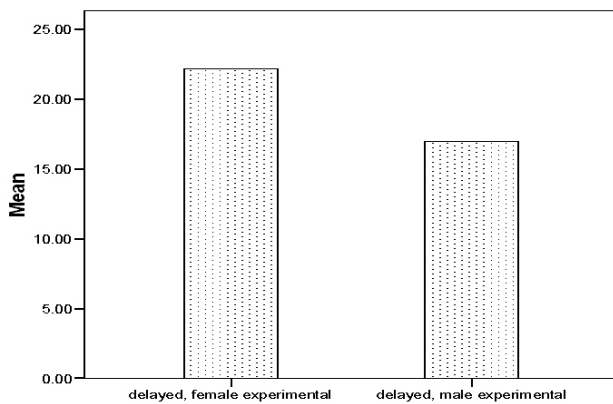
|        | Gender | N  | Mean    | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|--------|----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Scores | Male   | 19 | 17.0000 | 6.42910        | 1.47494         |
|        | Female | 20 | 21.7500 | 7.04777        | 1.57593         |

As the mean score shows, the female students performed better than their male counterparts in the delayed posttest too. Also an independent samples test was run to see the level of significance. The results are presented in table 5.

**Table 6**  
**Results of Independent Samples T-test between Males and Females Delayed Posttest**

|        |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | T-test for Equality of Means |        |                 |                 |                       |   |         |       |
|--------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---------|-------|
|        |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df     | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |         |       |
|        |                             |   |      |                              |        |                 |                 |                       |   | Lower   | Upper |
| Scores | Equal variances assumed     | .344                                    | .561 | -2.195                       | 37     | .034            | -4.75000        | 2.16368               | -9.13404                                  | -.36596 |       |
|        | Equal variances not assumed |   |      | -2.201                       | 36.943 | .034            | -4.75000        | 2.15847               | -9.12370                                  | -.37630 |       |

As the findings shows,  $p=0.034$  and so it can be considered significant. This result suggests that there are gender differences in the amount of effectiveness of the keyword method in the delayed posttest. So in the present study in, general, gender as a variable had influence on the effectiveness of the keyword method. Figure 2 also depicted and confirmed these findings.



**Figure 2**  
**The Mean of Delayed Posttest Scores for Males and Females in Experimental Groups**

The mean scores of delayed posttest for males and females in experimental groups are presented in Figure 2. As it is clear, even in delayed posttest, females were significantly higher than males.

Findings of the present study showed that there are significant differences between the male and female groups in terms of the mean of immediate posttest scores and also delayed posttest scores. According to the results presented here, the female students performed better than their male counterparts in both immediate and delayed posttest. This result may be due to the several psychological differences that exist between males and females. According to Batters (1986) females expend more time on “attentive activities” than males. As mentioned before, the major factor in the application of the keyword method is paying attention to both form and meaning. Again and again, it was observed in this study that females focused more deeply on instructional

program and also they were more interested in learning items by means of keyword method. Unfortunately, the influence of gender as a mediator variable in this field was not reported finely in the literature. So it appears that further researches are needed to examine more roughly the impact of this variable on the effectiveness of the keyword method.

The main purpose of the attitudinal questionnaire was to determine how L2 learners perceived the use of keyword method. To probe its corresponding null hypothesis (L2 learners do not have positive attitudes towards the application of the keyword method as a vocabulary learning method), frequency tables were drawn by identifying the participants’ attitudes towards the application of keyword method. According to the results of the attitude questionnaire which collected the quantitative data, in general, most of the students had positive attitudes towards the keyword method applications in the course. When the responses were examined, within questions that mainly reflected the personal view of the participants, 76% of the student stated that in general, they liked using keyword method. 60% said that they feel satisfied with the keyword method that it reduces the stress of vocabulary learning. Regarding the statement “I enjoyed learning by the keyword method, and I want to continue using this method in future,” 64% responded positively.

About 56% of the students expressed agreement that keyword method increased their motivation in learning new words. Almost 64% of students stated that they suggest this method to others for learning vocabulary. And 56% regarded the keyword method as fun, compared with other methods. These findings are in line with those of Bell (2008), Amrine (2008) and Hauptmann (2004). These findings may be due to the fact that Mnemonic Devices can be very effective and can make the students motivated because learners themselves find their mnemonic devices. It is apparent that the learners enjoyed keyword method and enjoyment, normally leads to increased motivation and also it is obvious that the majority prefers a course that incorporates them in the learning process and keyword method claimed that it could help learners in the learning process. This is probably due to the realization of an even greater majority that the keyword method helps

learners to learn better and faster and to recall longer and better. Also analysis of other item revealed that more than half of the students believed that keyword method could help them be autonomous and independent vocabulary learners. Also, 76% stated that keyword method can change teacher-centered classrooms to student-centered ones. These results may be interpreted in this way that Vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) is an approach which facilitates vocabulary learning and it is a movement away from teaching- oriented approach toward one that is more learner-centered (Schmitt, 2002). Strategies can help learners both in discovering the meaning of a word, and consolidating it and are specially needed when they are encouraged to learn autonomously (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the effect of gender differences on an instructional program based on the keyword method principles and procedures on the L2 learners' vocabulary retention as well as exploring their attitudes towards the application of this method. According to the result of immediate and delayed posttest, there is a significant difference between the achievement of males and females in the experimental group and, in both cases females outperformed males. So in the present study in, general, gender as a variable had influence on the effectiveness of the keyword method. With reference to the questionnaire items, In short, majority of the students found that keyword method instruction promote higher achievement and greater motivation than rote learning, and creates opportunity for them to be involved directly in the vocabulary learning process and in English Language acquisition.

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